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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 4436

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PN

SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY-ELECTION OF VICE PRESIDENT

REF: PANAMA 4319

SUMMARY: GERARDO GONZALEZ WAS ELECTED VICE PRESIDENT BY ASSEMBLY JULY 18 IN ALMOST UNANIMOUS VOTE. ONE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT, IN EXPLAINING HIS BLANK BALLOT, MADE MODERATELY DISSENTING STATEMENT URGING THAT DISCIPLINE AND LOYALTY TO REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS NOT BE MISTAKEN FOR LOYALTY TO GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS. WHILE GONZALEZ WAS PREFERRED GOP CANDIDATE, HE ALSO WAS PROBABLY THE ONE WITH GREATEST POTENTIAL POPULAR SUPPORT IN ASSEMBLY. GONZALEZ, A TORRIJOS MAN CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH THE REVOLUTION AND WITH THE RURAL AREAS, IS KNOWN AS A "POLITICAL ANIMAL" WHO WILL PROBABLY "TAKE THE VICE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE TO THE PEOPLE". SOME OF GOP'S CONSERVATIVE OPPONENTS WILL INTERPRET GONZALEZ' ELECTION AS A MOVE TO THE LEFT, BUT EMBASSY SOURCES HAVE INDICATED THAT GONZALEZ IS LESS DOCTRINAIRE LEFTIST THAN WAS SUCRE. END SUMMARY

1. NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF CORREGIMIENTO REPRESENTATIVES (NACR), IN SPECIAL SESSION IN DAVID ON JULY 18, ELECTED
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LIC. GERARDO GONZALEZ VERNAZA, MINISTER OF AGRICULTURAL

DE ELOPMENT AND INTERIM VICE PRESIDENT SINCE THE JULY 15 RESIGNATION OF VP SUCRE, TO FILL OUT SUCRE'S UNEXPIRED TERM BY VOTE OF 451 IN FAVOR, FOUR BLANK BALLOTS, TWO ABSTENTIONS, AND 48 REPRESENTATIVES NOT PRESENT. THE DESIGNATION OF GONZALEZ AS ACTING VICE PRESIDENT JULY 15 WAS ACLEAR INDICATION TO THE REPRESENTATIVES THAT GONZALEZ WAS TORRIJOS' CHOICE. HE WAS FORMALLY NOMINATED BY REPRESENTATIVE FROM VERAGUAS--HIS HOME PROVINCE--AND THE NOMINATION WAS ENDORSED BY 361 REPRESENTATIVES FROM ALL PROVINCES, ASSURING HIM OF ELECTION PRIOR TO THE ACTUAL VOTE. UPON ASSUMPTION OF OFFICE, GONZALEZ PAID TRIBUTE TO REVOLUTIONARY SERVICES RENDERED BY FORMER VP SUCRE.

2. FOLLOWING THE BALLOTING, REPRESENTATIVE LUIS EMILIO VECES, FORMER CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT YOUTH ACTIVIST, OBTAINED FLOOR TO EXPLAIN HIS BLANK BALLOT (FULL TEST FBIS PA182203Y). VECES STRESSED CONFIDENCE IN GUARDIA NACIONAL INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR REVOLUTION, AND SAID SEVERAL TIMES THAT EVERYONE KNEW THAT GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT BE OVERTHROWN, IMPLYING THEREBY THAT VICE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION NEED NOT HAVE BEEN CONDUCTED SO RAPIDLY AS TO PRECLUDE DISCUSSION OF OTHER CANDIDATES. VECES STATED THAT WHILE THERE HAD BEEN NO PRESSURE APPLIED TO DELEGATES, GONZALEZ' APPOINTMENT AS INTERIM VP HAD BEEN CLEAR SIGNAL OF DESIRES OF GOP LEADERS AND NACR MEMBERS HAD PERCEIVED GOVERNMENT DESIRE FOR SUPPORT. THERE HAD BEEN NO OPPORTUNITY FOR CONSULTATION WITH CONSTITUENTS, AND THEREFORE NO REAL BASIS FOR DECISION AT THIS TIME EXCEPT DESIRE TO DEMONSTRATE DISCIPLINE AND UNITY.

3. PRESIDENT LAKAS AND PRESIDENT OF NACR HAD ACTED PRECIPITOUSLY TO ACCEPT SUCRE RESIGNATION, WHICH ACCORDING TO VECES, WAS PROPERLY FUNCTION OF FULL ASSEMBLY AND HAD NOT ADDRESSED POSSIBILITY THAT NATION COULD HAVE VP ON LEAVE OF ABSENCE, OR THAT ILLNESS MIGHT NOT PREVENT VP FROM REMAINING POLITICAL FIGURE IN GOVERNMENT. VECES WONDERED, THEREFORE, HOW REPRESENTATIVES MIGHT EXPLAIN THEIR DECISION TO THE PEOPLE. VECES WENT ON TO DEPLORE THAT VARIOUS CIVILIAN FIGURES INCLUDING MINISTERS, WHO APPARENTLY DID NOT KNOW HOW TO STRENGTHEN THE

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REVOLUTIONARY EXPERIMENT, HAD SCOLDED REPRESENTATIVES AND PUBLIC, WORKERS AND STUDENTS, AS IF THEY WERE TRYING TO OVERTHROW GOVERNMENT. HE CONCLUDED "IN PROGRESSING TOWARD THE STRENGTHENING OF THE SYSTEM, WE SHOULD NOT PLAY WITH THE POLITICS OF THE LOYAL AND THE DISLOYAL, BECAUSE WHOEVER RULES A NATION MUST RULE NOT ONLY FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HIM BUT ALSO FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE IN HIM, BECAUSE THE NATION BELONGS TO ALL."

4. IN TELEVISED INTERVIEW FOLLOWING NACR SESSION (FULL TEXT PANAMA FBIS A190300Z) TORRIJOS DENIED SPECULATION IN WASHINGTON POST THAT SUCRE HAD BEEN ASKED TO RESIGN, SAYING THAT SUCRE HAD APPRISED HIM OF HEALTH PROBLEMS MONTHS AGO, AND AT THAT TIME HAD CONTINUED AS VP ONLY AT TORRIJOS' REQUEST. TORRIJOS ANNOUNCED THAT GONZALEZ WOULD CONTINUE TEMPORARILY IN CHARGE OF MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT UNTIL CONSULTATION WITH REPRESENTATIVES COULD ASSURE THAT SUCCESSOR SELECTED WOULD BE SATISFACTORY TO THEM. HE ALSO DENIED THAT THERE WOULD BE OTHER CHANGES IN GOVERNMENT AT THIS TIME.

5. COMMENT: GONZALEZ, AS MINISTER OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT, HAD MAINTAINED CLOSE CONTACT WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF RURAL AREAS AND HAD BEEN A KEY ORGANIZER OF 1972 ELECTIONS IN WHICH THE REPRESENTATIVES WERE ELECTED. HE WAS THUS A POPULAR AND WELL-KNOWN FIGURE WITH THE REPRESENTATIVES. THAT HE WAS DESIGNATED THREE DAYS BEFORE THE ELECTION AS INTERIM VICE PRESIDENT WAS A CLEAR INDICATION THAT HE WAS TORRIJOS' CHOICE. WHILE HE COULD PROBABLY HAVE COUNTED ON MAJORITY SUPPORT IN ANY CASE, ENDORSEMENT MADE GONZALEZ CANDIDACY A TEST OF THE REPRESENTATIVES' REVOLUTIONARY DISCIPLINE. THE VOTE THEREBY BECAME A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE FOR THE REVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP--TORRIJOS--AS WELL AS A MEANS OF ELECTING A VICE PRESIDENT.

6. ALTHOUGH GONZALEZ HAS NOT TURNED THE AGRICULTURE MINISTRY INTO AN EFFICIENT PRODUCTION MECHANISM, HE HAS BEEN POLITICALLY SUCCESSFUL IN MAINTAINING SUPPORT FOR THE REVOLUTION IN THE RURAL AREAS. HE IS BELIEVED TO BE LOYAL TO TORRIJOS, CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH THE REVOLUTION
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AND ACCEPTABLE TO LEFTISTS. ONE GOP SUPPORTER HAS TOLD US THAT GONZALEZ WILL BRING THE VICE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE TO THE PEOPLE--IN STARK CONTRAST TO SUCRE WHO WAS RARELY SEEN AND, ALTHOUGH HE WAS REGARDED AS A LEFTIST, HAD LITTLE IDENTIFICATION WITH THE PANAMANIAN REVOLUTION. GONZALEZ IN THE PAST MAY HAVE BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE COMMUNIST (PDP) PARTY BUT HE IS NOW CONSIDERED TO BE ONE OF THOSE LEFTISTS WHO HAVE BEEN COOPTED BY TORRIJOS AND HARNESSSED TO THE PANAMANIAN REVOLUTION. WHILE HE HAS MAINTAINED CONTACT WITH COMMUNISTS--INDEED KEEPING THE LEFT TRANQUIL HAS BEEN ONE OF HIS FUNCTIONS--HE IS CONSIDERED TO BE A PRAGMATIC POLITICIAN. AS MINISTER HE SUCCEEDED IN RAISING THE PRICE OF MILK, RICE AND MEAT WITHOUT PROVOKING POLITICAL TROUBLES FOR TORRIJOS--NO MEAN ACHIEVEMENT. THAT HE WILL CONTINUE TO ACT AS

INTERIM AGRICULTURE MINISTER APPEARS TO BE A SIGNAL THAT
NO MAJOR SHIFT IN AGRICULTURE POLICY IS INTENDED SOON.

7. GONZALEZ' ELECTION WILL UNDOUBTEDLY BE VIEWED BY
SOME CONSERVATIVES AS SIGNALLING A GOP SHIFT TO
THE LEFT; HOWEVER, OUR ASSESSMENT IS THAT AN EXISTING
POLITICAL BALANCE HAS BEEN MAINTAINED. SOME GOP
OFFICIALS HAVE INSISTED THAT SUCRE IS A HARD-CORE
CLANDESTINE COMMUNIST. WHATEVER THE TRUTH IN THOSE
CHARGES, CONFUSION STILL EXISTS CONCERNING THE EXACT
REASONS FOR SUCRE'S RESIGNATION.

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